

It has been nearly 6 years since the United States invaded Iraq and quickly toppled the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. What began as a violent yet virtually unimpeded occupation descended into intense civil conflict as a broad based insurgency comprised of Sunni militants, former Baathists, foreign terrorists including al Qaeda, and criminal elements revolted against the impending Shiite ascendancy and the presence of U.S. troops. The creation of a sovereign Iraqi government and the holding of elections, while significant milestones, failed to halt the bloodshed or restore order on the streets of Baghdad and other major cities. As the insurgency intensified, the U.S. military slowly incorporated counterinsurgency tactics culminating in the appointment of General David Petraeus, author of the official military manual on counterinsurgency, as Commander of U.S. Forces in Iraq.

In January 2007, President Bush unveiled a new plan to send 30,000 more troops to Iraq in an effort to provide the security necessary for political reconciliation. The increase in troops helped bring about a significant reduction in violence, but so far the strategy has failed to create a political consensus between opposing factions of the Iraqi government. Contributing mightily to this reduction in violence was the decision of Sunni leaders in Al-Anbar province to join with U.S. forces in opposing foreign terrorists. As Iraqis have turned against foreign terrorists, U.S. forces have assisted Sunni militants, including some former insurgents, in forming small security forces to patrol their neighborhoods. Radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr also urged his militia, responsible for fomenting Shiite-Sunni violence, to freeze their activities. All of these factors combined to bring about a reduction in violence.

While I welcome the reduction in violence, I do not believe that Iraq's divisions can be solved militarily. As General Petraeus has said, the war in Iraq requires a political rather than military solution. We must engage all of Iraq's neighbors, including Iran and Syria, in creation of a working coalition to build a stronger and more unified government in Iraq. Our policy should reflect the fact that the situation in Iraq is not just an Iraqi or American problem, but an international crisis that demands constructive cooperation rather than blind adherence to self-interest.

In November 2008, the United States and Iraq signed a Status-of-Forces Agreement (SOFA) dictating the guidelines for the future relationship between the U.S. and Iraq. The SOFA establishes that U.S. combat forces will withdraw from Iraqi cities by June 30, 2009, and all U.S. forces will be completely out of Iraq by December 31, 2011, subject to possible further negotiations which could delay withdrawal and a referendum scheduled for mid-2009 in Iraq which may require U.S. forces to completely leave by the middle of 2010. While I am heartened to see a proposed end-date to the U.S. occupation of Iraq, I believe that this agreement, brokered by the Bush team, has too many loopholes by which American troop presence could

be extended.

I have confidence that President Obama will stick to his campaign promise and do everything he can to see a full withdrawal of our troops from Iraq as quickly and effectively as possible. Being clear about the limited nature of our presence will be a powerful incentive for the Iraqi government to take advantage of the recent security improvements to resolve their differences and begin the process of unifying their country.